La Couronne, or: Other Nature

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La Couronne, or: Other Nature

by celestialcello

Summary

When the morning came, everyone would know that the youngest prince of the King was a monster hidden beneath layers of silk and porcelain skin.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

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Before the departure of the night could engulf the soulless vast of the late April field in the gossamer shroud of morning mist, a hooded figure was seen sneaking out of the city gate surreptitiously, leading a black stallion in his rein. Something shiny was quickly exchanged between him and a yawning, shrewd-looking guard before he mounted on the horse and with a tap on his hip, they disappeared into the depth of the wilderness, quicker and quicker until the beating of the hooves faded away into the damp air rising from the dark earth.

The guard's beaded eyes followed them with a crooked smile as he turned the gold coin round and round between his dry fingers.The rooster's crow shattered the slumber hanging above the tall walls when he dawdled away humming an off-beat children's song.

Run away, little Mary Jane, run away and never turn back.

Into the woods, poor Mary Jane, into the woods and never come out again. O, Mary, Mary, what have you done?

O, Mary, Mary, will you remember this song?'

~*~

When the morning came, everyone would know that the youngest son of the King was a monster hidden beneath layers of silk and porcelain skin. And so they did, the golden rays of sunlight filled the air with an unseasonal chill, akin to that of late autumn, the cusp of winter just out of touch. In the middle of the town square stood proudly the prince's last relic: a flayed, gutted remnant of a man pierced onto the head of a stag, everything dark hidden inside him exposed under the light, his spilled viscera crimson sacrifices across his bent knees, his hands reaching out for fealty.

A young girl who came out cleaning horse dungs was among the first who witnessed the grotesque statue. She followed his pallid gaze into the cerulean, unusually cloudless sky and caught the glimpse of a nameless black bird gliding across the City.

But she was not afraid, did not scream, did not cry. For she remembered the night when the man broke into the shackle where she lived with her sister, beat her and made her scream in agony beneath him. Until finally, he crushed her sister's delicate skull against the wall with a quiet crunch.

She watched them silently hidden inside a pile of hay at the corner. She watched him silently now as well.

She tried with great difficulty to remember the words of prayer her sister used to whisper, sending her blessing to the disappeared Prince.

She found it incomprehensibly beautiful, and thought this must be a miracle.

~*~

‘It is with a grave heart that I announce the untimely death of Prince William from a certain kind of plague last night. To avoid the spread of infection, the King has made the difficult decision of cremating the Prince’s body early this morning. His ashes will be spread into the sea with the blessing of the Priestess, his horse has been offered as sacrifice to the gods to appease their anger. As such, there would be no funeral. May he found peace in the afterlife.’

The nobles murmured quietly after the court physician read out the announcement. Distrustful words and looks were exchanged, notes were passed and an understanding was shared.

The King watched over the crowd in formidable silence. His expression betrayed nothing but his eyes mourned the loss of his son to a darkness other than death.

~*~

He did not dare to stop until the woods grew impregnably dense around him, sheltering away the last memory of light with the thick canopy of foliage. They clothed him in ancient ombre and cool breeze. Will’s only companion was panting quietly after the frantic journey they shared. His eyes skilfully gauging the ground and occasional streams with each step he took, alerted and fiercely unflinching just like his master and friend.

‘I heard water. Through there, Winston, let’s get you some rest.’ He tapped lovingly at his muscular neck.

The horse snorted quietly at the gesture, then galloped down the path covered with fallen leaves in motley of gold, crimson and sienna, which was a strange occurrence considering the time of the year. But it has been a long day and Will could already smell the coming of night among the susurrating silence of this forest. They have already set foot into the land forbidden to mortals for better or worse, fear and conservation were practically superfluous. *Exiles cannot afford to be picky*, he thought grimly to himself.

Along the way the forest quieted down until an eerie silence loomed over them, watching, waiting, and there were a thousand eyes in the dark tracing the rider and his horse. Will tightened his grip around the reins, and with a low growl attempted to warn away whatever was there, hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Soundlessly Winston too picked up his pace, crushing the leaves and brought with him a rush of dust and dried muds, faster and faster until they broke free from the suffocating narrowness and onto an opening overlooking a coursing river.

At the other side of the bank, the ground was covered in the whiteness of new snow.

Will gritted his teeth, and as he looked back, unsurprisingly the path has vanished among dense shrubs and endless woods as if it was never there before.

He dismounted Winston, carefully disassembled the leather bridle and removed the saddle. Without these it would be more likely that whatever ruled this part of the land would choose to overlook Winston. They usually bore no grudge against animals, after all. The horse

watched his movement intently, but refused to budge even as Will tried to guide him further away from the river.

‘Stubborn.’ Will placed his palm softly on his snout, committing the warmth and smell to his memory - something good to bring with him into the weightless void of death.

But when he turned around to toss the saddlery and his sword into the fluid crystal of water - a gesture of surrender, as he doubted anything in his possession could damage even the hair of the being he was doomed to face - his eyes fell into the fathomless depth of an unnaturally gigantic stag. Its furs a lustrous blackness just like Winston in his better days, uncertain shadows of bird feathers appearing and disappearing like hints of reminiscence from a year-long dream that he has not yet dreamt but already familiar with.

He probably should be afraid, yet somehow, just like his horse, all he could sense was a quiet curiosity, a baseless yet sound confidence that they were destined to be friends rather than enemies.

The sky was drenched in a bruising violet as the warbling of birds and insects returned as if in anticipation of something. And in the dimming skylight, the stag’s antlers seemed like another labyrinth of forest.

As the strange, amicable silence stretched on, Will eventually chose to speak first, mindful of putting down his earthly belongings in a show of respect, ‘Are you here for my life? I have travelled here in exile for a great sin, hence I would offer it willingly, if you would spare my friend your ire.’

The creature grinned, baring its sharp fangs, shining coldly like rows of blades. Will responded with a relieved sigh, which was, however, soon replaced by a surprised gasp as the creature shifted into a half-human standing proudly on the same strong hind legs of the stag, covered in a medley of fur and feather, its claws carved out of ebony, eyes the colour familiar to Will. A rusty crimson that was deceptively warm, adorned with the crinkles of an inscrutable smile.

‘There is no need to be so formal, William of Graham. I do not presently want your life. Instead, I am glad you have found your way here so soon.’

‘I don’t believe we have met.’

‘Not in flesh, no. But you have offered the most magnificent of sacrifices, and I came answering your call.’

Will frowned at the unexpected turn of events, ‘Yet I did not remember thinking of any god last night.’

The creature stepped closer this time, its eyes glowed intently, and Winston obediently retreated from them without the need of another sign. ‘You were right. But Will - if I may address you as such - allow me to ask you a question: what did you feel when you tore the skin from that man alive under the watch of the constellations? What did you remember?’

The god's questions conjured up the heaps of broken images from their shallow grave in his memory, still pulsating and burning like the heart he gently freed from the man's heaving chest, 'I felt… Powerful. I remember the warmth of his rotten blood and bones. I remember the emancipation.'

He did not protest when the god framed his face with the glistening talons and luke-warm flesh of its palm, unexpectedly soft.

'And welcome to the land of the emancipated, the Forest beyond the world. You will be a Prince again, Will. Here, with me.'

The night had finally spread open its impatient wings and devoured the world beneath soundlessly. Blood trickled down his forehead accompanied by flaring pain as his new crown of writhing antlers grew into their full glories.

'And what should I call you?'

'Hannibal.'

End Notes

Thanks for reading! This is definitely an idea I want to come back to again to expand in more details. Probably by Christmas? We shall see then!❤️

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